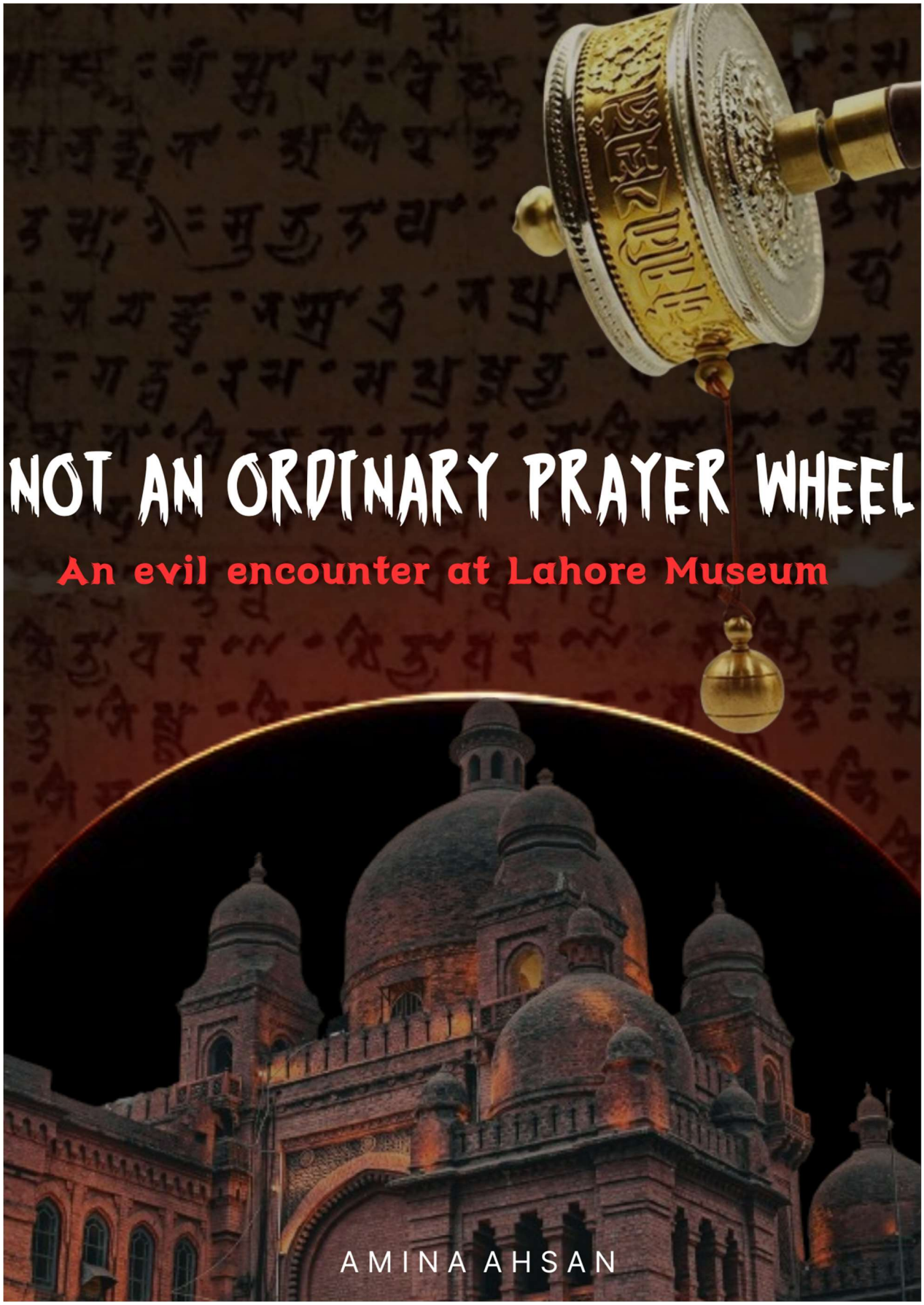
NOT AN ORDINARY PRAYER WHEEL
An evil encounter at Lahore Museum
AMINA AHSAN

NOT AN ORDINARY PRAYER WHEEL

(AN EVIL ENCOUNTER AT LAHORE MUSEUM)

A SHORT STORY BY - AMINA AHSAN

Author's Note

I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to my dear friend Qurat-ul-Ain, whose remarkable insights and creativity were a profound source of inspiration for one of the characters in this story. Her unique perspective and thoughtful influence were instrumental in shaping this character, and without her input, the story would not have unfolded in the way it did.

This story is a work of fiction, crafted with imagination and respect. It is important to note that resemblance to real people, events, or locations is purely coincidental. The narrative is designed to entertain and provoke thought, and in doing so, it strives to respect and honor all religious beliefs and cultural landmarks. I sincerely hope that it is received with the same spirit of appreciation and curiosity with which it was written.

A special acknowledgment goes to the Lahore Museum for its significant role in inspiring the setting and atmosphere of the story.

IT WAS AN ORDINARY “Cleaning Monday” at the Lahore Museum, the air filled with dust and the smell of cleaning chemicals. Zoya, the new intern, stifled a yawn as she made her rounds, clipboard in hand. She'd been tasked with inventory duty - hardly the glamorous job she'd envisioned when applying for the internship as she was becoming an archaeologist and she assumed that she would be working for the conservation department while being a novice. Room after room, she ticked off items: Indus Valley pottery, check; Gandhara sculptures, check; Mughal miniatures, check. By the time she reached the Buddhism Gallery, her mind was numb with boredom.

Absentmindedly, she reached out to pick up a small, aimlessly placed, dusty scroll from the corner of a cabinet, right next to a prayer wheel. Breaking the cardinal rule of never touching artifacts, Zoya carefully unrolled the scroll. The writing was in Classical Tibetan, which she couldn't read, but she recognized an image of a prayer wheel similar to the one beside it. Curiosity piqued, she replaced the scroll, reached for the wheel, and started spinning it.

The moment her fingers touched the cool metal, the lights flickered. Zoya froze, her heart suddenly racing. In the brief moment of darkness, she could have sworn she heard a monk chanting,

Thankfully, it was her friend who was screaming her name to stop her as Zoya was holding an artefact.

“Zoya! Why are you not listening to me? are you crazy? If that thing broke, your kidneys won’t be sufficient to pay the price for it,” said Zoe.

“Alright! Alright! I am putting it back but tell me who was singing in a Chinese-like language in here?” said Zoya nervously while putting the bell back in its place.

“Singing? Do you think any of us is happy enough to sing while doing the most boring work and that too in Chinese?” said Zoe while making a strange face.

“Never mind, let’s go home its off time,” said Zoya while leaving the gallery.

The last echoes of footsteps faded as both of them were making their way back to the gates of the museum when suddenly Zoya heard the whistling of the guard and it was the same as the rhythm of chanting she heard. Zoya's steps slowed, her mind racing. The guard's tune was similar to the chanting she'd heard moments ago.

"What's wrong?" Zoe asked, noticing her friend's hesitation.

"That whistling..." Zoya began, her voice was trembling.

The guard, an elderly man with a strange facial mark, greeted them with a nod. As they passed, Zoya couldn't help but ask, "Sir, that tune you're whistling - what is it?"

The guard's eyes widened slightly. "Just an old song, miss. Been in my head all day."

Zoya pressed further, "Is it... Chinese or Tibetan, perhaps?"

The guard's whistling stopped abruptly. He stared at Zoya.

"How did you know that?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Zoe tugged at Zoya's arm. "Come on, we'll be late for the bus."

As they hurried away, Zoya glanced back. The guard was watching them intently, his lips moving silently as if in prayer. The last rays of sunlight caught the metal of a small object in his hand - something that looked strangely like a miniature prayer wheel.

Zoya shivered, suddenly eager to put as much distance between herself and the museum as possible. She hurriedly crossed the Mall Road, her mind racing. Halfway across, she glanced at the familiar statue of Prof A.C. Woolner. Her heart nearly stopped.

Instead of the professor's likeness, a demonic figure loomed, its body covered in tattoos. The writings looked similar to those on the scroll she'd touched earlier.

"Watch out!" Zoe screamed to save Zoya and pushed her away from the bus.

Zoya was extremely terrified. "Did... did you see that?" she pointed at the statue, which now looked normal.

Zoe was confused. "See what? The bus that almost hit you?"

Zoya shook her head, trying to clear it. "No, the statue. It changed."

"You're not making sense," Zoe said, concern to the terror on her face. "Let's get you home. You look pale."

As they walked away, Zoya couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. She glanced back at the museum, its windows dark and empty. Or were they? For a split second, she thought she saw a face pressed against the glass of the Buddhism Gallery.

"Zoe," Zoya whispered, "I think I've made a terrible mistake by touching that prayer wheel."

“Come on! It was just an ordinary prayer wheel; it rather feels like you have you have smoked out of the old opium pipes placed at the museum” said Zoe while being annoyed.

Zoya and Zoe both got on the bus and all along their way to home, Zoe was continuously joking to make Zoya a bit easy; she also made Zoya accept the fact that all of this was happening because she was exhausted and she needed to take a day off.

It was nearly dusk when Zoya reached home. Her mother welcomed her happily and gave her food.

“The food is yummy,” said Zoya with a smile but restlessness in her behavior.

Little did her mother knew that something was wrong, but she acted cool and suggested watching a movie with Zoya and the rest of her sisters to lighten her mood. They all

watched “The Medium” together. During one scene Zoya saw the demonic monster again and bawled.

‘Mama… Mama… I have seen a similar demon today, it’s all because of that artefact” said Zoya while crying. She was on the edge of losing her senses yet none of her family members had any clue of what horror she was going through.

“Don’t act like a child, it’s just a movie” her sister said.

“I told you, my child, before, not to exhaust yourself because of work; It’s just an internship and you are putting in too much effort. Now take a day off tomorrow and go to your bed,” said Mom.

Zoya agreed with her mother and went to her bed. Before bed, her mother gave her a sleeping pill, as she was a doctor. Zoya went to sleep swiftly and got up after a good sleep of 14 hours. The next day went quite well, she saw nothing upsetting and by the night she had forgotten all that happened a day before, as she accepted the fact it was just because of fatigue.

The following morning, Zoya woke up feeling refreshed. She got ready for work and almost forgot about the events that happened the day before yesterday. As she entered the museum with Zoe, everything seemed normal. They chatted and laughed, going about their usual tasks.

However, as the day progressed, Zoya felt an odd sensation, like something was calling her. She tried to ignore it, but the feeling grew stronger. Minutes before the off time, Zoya went on a round to check if every visitor had left the museum. There, she spotted the elderly guard. In his hand was the prayer wheel she had touched. Zoya's heart raced.

"Excuse me," she called out, "Why do you have that prayer wheel?"

The guard's eyes gleamed unnaturally. His face contorted into a grin that was more grimace than a smile. "Perhaps you should check on your friend, rather than questioning me," he said, his voice raspy and cold.

Confused and uneasy, Zoya looked around for Zoe. She found her friend standing motionless in front of a row of Buddha statues. As Zoya approached, she noticed something terrifying - the head of a statue, Its eyes following Zoe. Even more horrifying, Zoe's head was moving in sync with the statues while her eyes were all red.

"Zoe!" Zoya cried out, but her friend didn't respond.

Panic rising, Zoya turned to call for help, but the guard had vanished. The museum suddenly felt vast and empty. And as she turned around to look at Zoe she was not there, she was never there, it was more of a ghost. As the announcement for closing echoed through the halls Zoya ran to save her life. But before she could move, she heard the heavy main doors slam shut. The guard's voice came over the intercom, tinged with

malice: "Good night, Zoya. Sweet dreams." The lights went out, plunging them into darkness and Zoya fainted.

On the other hand, Zoe was waiting for Zoya.

“Oh! You are closing the doors?” asked Zoe to the guard

“Yes! Everyone left for their homes what else am I supposed to do” said the guard while being annoyed.

“But sir… my friend, do you know where she is? Zoe asked while being confused.

“Yes! She left and now you go too,” said the guard.

“What a jerk, I wasn’t asking for half of your property, but my friend” whispered Zoe “Agh! I don’t care about you Zoya as well, you went without telling me; now I won’t even call you,” said Zoe while kicking the trashcan.

Zoya regained her consciousness in the dark museum. She then reached for her phone but realized that it was missing. Unknown to her, the guard had taken it earlier, sending a message to her mother claiming she was staying with friends.

As Zoya explored the silent halls, she heard the echoes of the chanting. After a while, all she could see was a demonic shadow around her. She ran for her life while screaming and reached the Indus Gallery. This gallery was her favorite one, she used to spend hours and hours in there to do her research work; It almost felt like a home to her to be around her favorite artefacts from her favorite period. She sat there for long, holding her knees close to her chest. She dozed off for a while. During her sleep, she had a dream that she was about to be sacrificed in a fire, and all she could hear was chanting in Tibetan language. At one point she saw someone like the guard grabbed her from her neck, it was then when she woke up with tears in her eyes while panting.

While standing in the middle of the room, stone artifacts levitated and shattered the glass of the cabinets. They all were hitting Zoya brutally, and she started bleeding from her head. The museum was echoing with her shouts.

“Why God! What have I done to deserve this all.” Said Zoya while crying. “Please save me” she begged.

There was no safe place for her in the museum. All she could do was, knock at the door of the museum, in the hope that someone might help her. She shouted at the top of her lungs, but all in vain. In the meantime, she heard a sound unfamiliar to her, which caught her attention. She had no idea what it was but it sounded like bells.

“Who’s there,” she said

She saw a lady running in the hallway, later Zoya realized, it was the mannequin from the ethnology section who was wearing traditional clothes. The mannequin was aiming to kill

Zoya but she narrowly escaped the attack on her and ran towards the Buddhism gallery, aiming to break the prayer wheel as she thought it might end all the trouble.

She broke the glass of the window and reached for the prayer wheel. As she was about to spin it a force of shadow hit her head and she was on the floor. A cabinet adjacent to her opened and her eyes saw something so terrible before they were closed for long.

The next morning, as the first rays of sunlight touched the building of the Lahore Museum, the security guards arrived to open the museum. As they approached the main entrance, a silence hung in the air. The head guard, Mr. Rashid, fumbled with his keys while having no idea what was coming next.

The moment the door opened; screams echoed through the halls. From the beautiful dome de vestibule, a body draped in a white kafan (burial shroud) was hanging. The guards stumbled backward, their faces pale with shock and horror.

Within minutes, the area was swarming with police and paramedics. The sound of sirens was all over the place. The yellow tape blocked off the museum entrance as curious people started to gather.

Zoe arrived at her usual time; her steps stopped as she took in the chaotic scene. Her heart raced as she approached the police.

"What happened?" she asked a nearby officer, her voice trembling. "Please, I work here.

The officer's face remained impassive. "I'm sorry, miss. We can't disclose any information at this time. Please step back."

Zoe's searched for any familiar face. Through the open museum doors, she caught a glimpse of the body hanging from the dome. A wave of nausea hit her, and she stumbled backward, her hand flying to her mouth to stifle a scream.

Just then, her phone rang. With shaking hands, she answered.

"Hello?" she managed to answer.

"Zoe, dear!" It was Zoya's mother, her voice cheerful and oblivious. "I was wondering if you'd like to join us for breakfast after your night-out plans. I'm making Zoya's favorite parathas, you both need to come quickly."

Zoe felt the world spin around her as she was trying to figure out what was happening.

Meanwhile, forensics combed through the Buddhism Gallery. The broken glass from the display case lay scattered on the floor. The prayer wheel was found nearby, its metal surface smeared with what appeared to be blood.

As the day wore on, more details emerged. Security footage showed Zoya entering the museum but never leaving it and the guard who closed the museum yesterday, was missing too.

As the investigation unfolded, a shocking twist emerged. The autopsy report revealed that the body hanging from the dome wasn't Zoya's. It belonged to an unidentified young woman.

When this news reached Zoya's family, chaos erupted. Her mother collapsed, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Where is my daughter? Where is my Zoya?" she cried, her voice echoing through the hospital corridors.

Zoya's father, with worry, demanded answers from the police. "Find her! You must find her!" he shouted, his voice cracking with emotion.

Amidst the turmoil, Zoe felt a determination rising within her. She couldn't just stand by while her friend was missing. after the police had left, she snuck back into the museum. The empty halls seemed to whisper secrets in the darkness.

Carefully, she made her way to the Buddhism Gallery. The broken glass crunched under her feet as she approached the display case. With trembling hands, she reached for the blood-stained prayer wheel and the stroll, wrapping it in her scarf and never letting it touch her skin.

After leaving the museum, Zoe found herself at the doorstep of Dr. Ameer, a retired professor of ancient languages. "Please," she begged, holding out the scroll, "can you read this?"

Dr. Ameer's eyes widened as he examined the scroll. "This is ancient Tibetan," he said. "But it's... it's not quite right. We need an expert."

Desperate for answers, Dr. Ameer reached out to a contact at a remote Tibetan monastery. That very evening, they managed to set up a video call with an elderly monk named Lobsang.

As Dr. Ameer held up the scroll to the camera, Lobsang's face drained of color. "Where did you find this?" he whispered, his voice filled with dread.

Zoe explained about the museum and the prayer wheel. As she spoke, the seriousness appeared on the face of Mr. Lobsang.

These writings," Lobsang said, his elderly voice, "they're all wrong. The inscriptions on the wheel are distorted, twisted, and evil. And this scroll... it's not a complete text. It seems to be torn from a larger piece."

Lobsang leaned closer to his screen and squinted his eyes.

"I can only read out about sacrifices and revenge. This is deeply troubling."

He shook his head solemnly. "You must understand, that prayer wheels are sacred objects meant to spread peace and wisdom. But this... someone has corrupted its purpose. Buddhism teaches compassion, not vengeance."

Lobsang's eyes met Zoe's through the screen. "Whatever you do, do not touch that wheel again. Someone has turned a tool of enlightenment into something dark. We must find a way to undo this corruption before it causes more harm."

The video call ended, leaving Zoe and Dr. Ameer in stunned silence, the weight of Lobsang's words hanging heavy in the air.

"Where is my friend?" Zoe cried.

Dr. Ameer put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Zoe, you need to get yourself together for your friend... and I remembered you talked about a guard. I feel like there's something odd about him."

Zoe's eyes widened. "You're right! There was always something skeptical about that guard. He gave me the creeps every time I saw him."

With renewed determination after leaving Dr. Ameer's home, Zoe decided to go back to the museum to put the items back. As night fell, she snuck into the building, her heart pounding in her chest. The empty halls seemed to whisper secrets in the darkness. While covering her hands she reached for the artefacts and placed them back.

Later she made her way to the guard's office, hoping to find some clues. As she went through drawers, she found an old photograph. It showed the guard standing next to a man in strange robes. On the back was written: "Tibet, 1980." Inside another drawer, was a roll of pieces of paper that looked just like the torn stroll, she found earlier. But next to it was something so terrible, an album that had red crosses on pictures of people, which had a picture of Zoya at the end.

With shaking hands, she reached for her phone to call Dr. Ameer. But he never picked up her phone, so she was all alone. The museum that was once so familiar now felt like a dangerous maze, hiding secrets darker than she could have ever imagined.

Zoe's mind raced. She couldn't stay here, she grabbed the old photograph, the roll of papers, and the album and she fled the museum.

The cool night air hit her face as jumped out of the building. She ran until her lungs burned, not stopping until she reached the safety of her home. Collapsing onto her bed, she spread out the items she'd taken. With trembling fingers, she unrolled the papers. They were covered in strange symbols and diagrams, interspersed with text in what looked like ancient Tibetan. To know what's written on the full stroll, she emailed the old monk Lobsang, with the pictures.

In the morning, as soon as she opened her eyes she rushed for her computer. Right after reading Mr. Lobsang's reply, she sat in denial for a while, about how evil can a person be.

His reply said "Hello! Zoe. I have translated the whole text; you need to do something about it.

Zoe opened the translation file attached to the email, which said:

“They cast me out, despite everything I did to maintain the appearance of being innocent to become a monk and gain the status of being respectful. It was the only wish of my family, I spent as a virtuous husband and father, but my wife discovered the truth and left me with our son, disgusted by what I am. What was my mistake, I did what I wanted but they called me evil. But they will all pay for not letting me fulfill my wishes. The wheel that was supposed to spread enlightenment will now be my tool for revenge. I will use the ancient shamanic arts—powers that people fear and misunderstand—to gain the strength I need. Someone, just like me will gather 108 pure souls to fuel my rise and will feed the prayer wheel their blood. Soon, the barriers between our worlds will break down, and true chaos will take over. They thought they could silence me, but they have only awakened a force of vengeance that will consume them all on the hour of Hybrid solar eclipses.”

Zoe's blood ran cold as she read. The pieces fell into place, forming a horrifying picture. The number 108 caught her attention, and with a terrible realization, she reached for the album and began counting the photos.

"1, 2, 3... 105, 106, 107."

Her hand shook as she turned to the final page, revealing Zoya’s bright smile.

"108," Zoe whispered, in her voice breaking.

The album slipped from her hands and thudded to the floor. Stunned, Zoe sat in silence as the horror washed over her. Then, tears streamed down her face as she grabbed her phone and dialed the police.

"Please, you have to help! My friend is in danger. There's a man at the museum planning to kill my friend and has killed 107 souls already.".

"Miss, are you prank-calling us,” said the operator

Frustrated and determined, Zoe ended the call. If the police wouldn't help, she would take matters into her own hands. Wiping her tears, she gathered useful items—a flashlight, journal pages, and a kitchen knife. The mention of a "hybrid solar eclipse" in the journal nagged at her. She quickly searched online and felt her heart drop, it was just tomorrow.

As the hours ticked away and the sun dipped lower in the sky, Zoe’s panic grew. She knew time was running out before the eclipse. Desperate for answers, she reached to the nearby Jinnah Library, hoping to find any book that might offer insights or solutions.

In the library’s dimly lit research section, Zoe searched through the catalog, looking for anything related to Tibetan curses, ancient rituals, or the hybrid solar eclipse mentioned in the translation. Soon her eyes landed on an old, leather-bound volume titled *"Tibetan Mysticism and the Dark Arts."* Zoe’s hands trembled as she pulled the book from the shelf and flipped through its yellowed pages. To her relief, the book contained detailed accounts of rituals and counter-spells used to combat dark enchantments.

Among the pages, she discovered a section specifically about dispelling curses involving sacred artifacts. It said:

"To dispel the curse, the corrupted object must be cast into a fire lit with dark intent. An evil force will ignite this fire during any rare eclipse. If the flames are not extinguished and the object destroyed before the eclipse ends, the darkness will consume everything in its path."

Zoe's breath caught as she realized the truth: someone, would light the fire during the eclipse, using the prayer wheel as part of a sacrificial ritual. The horrifying thought struck her, Zoya would be the sacrifice. Zoe was still unaware of where her friend might be.

As the library's closing time approached, Zoe's heart raced with a dreadful realization, the cursed prayer wheel was still in the museum, and someone would soon come for it. While panicking she rushed to the museum, only to find the doors firmly locked. Zoe sat down on the cold steps and waited through the long, tense night. The timing hybrid solar eclipse was during the sunrise.

Just before dawn, Zoe heard footsteps approaching. Her breath stopped as the elderly guard, the same man who she suspected, emerged from the darkness. She quickly ducked behind a nearby plant, she was astonished as he pulled out a set of duplicate keys unlocked the door, and slipped inside.

The museum was soaked in silence. Zoe followed the guard's shadowy figure through the dimly lit corridors, keeping a safe distance. The guard moved towards a hidden door behind a dusty door after getting the prayer wheel. The door had a staircase leading to the roof. Zoe's dread intensified as she followed him silently up the stairs.

On the roof, the scene was nightmarish. The guard had set up a massive, blazing fire in the shape of a circle, symbolizing the hybrid solar eclipse. The fire roared with an unnatural heat, casting monstrous shadows that twisted and danced like tortured souls. As the eclipse began, the sky darkened, and ghostly figures with tattoos all over them descended from the clouds.

The guard chanted the same tune that Zoya once heard, it meant, Evil over righteous in Ancient Tibetan. The guard approached Zoya, who was tied with ropes, beside the blazing circle. The Bright day was turning dark and the wailing of the spirits grew louder, mingling with the roar of the fire. Zoe hid behind a large air vent, her eyes wide with terror, as she watched the guard prepare to stab Zoya with the prayer wheel.

As the eclipse reached totality, the guard raised the prayer wheel high, to stab into Zoya's chest. Zoe's fear turned into action. She grabbed a heavy iron rod and, with a burst of courage, emerged from her hiding place and hit the guard.

"You should have stayed away!" he shouted. "I'm the son of the man who cursed this wheel. I know you know all this after stealing my things. My father was wronged and cast out, and now I'll restore his honor by unleashing hell upon the world."

Zoe’s heart raced as she faced the guard, who unleashed a wave of dark magic. She was thrown back, which hurt her a lot.

Despite her fear, she said with utter pain. “I’ll stop you! My friendship means more than your vengeance!”

With a final effort, Zoe grabbed the prayer wheel which was near her feet, and threw it with all the powers she had towards the fire, its corrupt touched her hands and she started having fits.

The guard, furious, tried to save the wheel and jumped into the fire while saving it. His face twisted in pain as he jumped into the fire, trying to grab the prayer wheel. The flames surrounded him, making him scream and writhe. His body shook as the fire burned hotter, pulling him down. His last cries were lost in the roar of the flames but his last words were the name of his father.

As the eclipse ended, the fire’s roar quieted, and the dark spirits vanished into the light of dawn. The guard’s body was gone, consumed by the flames. But the remains of the prayer wheel were still there.

Zoe struggled to wake Zoya, who was unconscious but safe.

“Zoya, it’s over. We’re free,” Zoe said, gently shaking her friend.

Zoya slowly tried to get up with all her strength, her eyes wide with confusion as she saw the burned, twisted remains of the cursed prayer wheel. With the danger gone, the museum seemed to regain a sense of calm.

The two friends, exhausted and bruised, made their way out of the museum. Where the police had already arrived as Zoe called them earlier. Zoe and Zoya were taken to the hospital, where they spent a month getting better.

The police found and identified the bodies of those who had been killed and told their families. The people who were killed had been good, and the guard and his father were responsible. The investigation revealed that the guard and his father had been running from country to country. The father had died in Nepal thirty years ago, the government had taken the prayer wheel during a raid on their home ten years ago. The Prayer wheel ended up in the Lahore Museum after a donation of assets ceremony between Pakistan and China, this is the reason why the son came to Pakistan.

After a month, Zoe and Zoya visited the museum again. It had reopened for visitors, and the danger was over. The two friends felt relief as they walked through the museum, laughing and chatting. When they reached the Buddhism gallery, they saw the broken prayer wheel displayed behind glass.

Zoe glanced at it and said, "You know, when we first saw it, I thought it was just an ordinary prayer wheel."

Zoya nodded, still staring at the display. "Yes, you did too. But now, looking at it, I can see it's not an ordinary prayer wheel."

As they continued through the gallery, Zoya noticed a small display case with a necklace inside. It had a tiny prayer wheel charm, similar to what the guard had worn. She picked it up, and as she put it on, her eyes seemed to shimmer with a new, mysterious light.

Zoe looked at her friend, puzzled. "Zoya, is everything alright?"

Zoya simply smiled a hint of something unreadable in her gaze.

"Yes, everything is fine," she said with a bright smile, her gaze lingering on the ancient sculpture in the hallway. Her eyes sparkled with excitement as if she had a whole new secret to keep.

THE END